

SIMPLY REGISTER, DINE AND
PAY WITH YOUR CARD*.
AMEXDINING.COM.AU

ENTER NOW

*conditions apply



[guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

Guitars down, comrades: rock stars launch union to stand up for their rights

Radiohead, Pink Floyd and Robbie Williams among founders of
artists' coalition

Owen Gibson, media correspondent

guardian.co.uk, Saturday October 4 2008 00.01 BST

The Guardian, Saturday October 4 2008

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Radiohead's Thom Yorke at Glastonbury. Photograph: PA

Millionaire rock stars are traditionally more synonymous with conspicuous consumption than the workers' struggle. But artists including Robbie Williams, Radiohead and The Verve are among those who might be about to swap sex, drugs and rock'n'roll for banners, braziers and manifestos - having formed a new organisation to stand up for their rights.

Among the dozens of founder members of the Featured Artists' Coalition are Radiohead's Thom Yorke and Red Wedge veteran Billy Bragg, - who did after all record *There is Power in a Union* - but also former Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour, The Klaxons, DJ Paul Oakenfold, Craig David, Iron Maiden and the Kaiser Chiefs.

All argue that the new organisation, to be launched tomorrow at the In the City conference in Manchester, is vital to represent their interests as the music industry is turned on its head by digital distribution. Damon Gough, of Badly Drawn Boy, said: "I think with the digital age and record companies dispersing and disbanding, young bands need a governing voice that will support them and help protect their work."

The organisation will "speak with one voice to help artists strike a new bargain with record companies, digital distributors and others ... by engaging with government, music and technology companies, and collection societies, arguing for fair play and, where necessary, exposing unfair practices".

The industry has been revolutionised since Napster sparked panic by bringing illegal file sharing to a mass audience 10 years ago; CD sales have collapsed and digital downloads have soared, but they have failed to make up the gap.

But while the digital revolution was traumatic for big labels, it has opened up new

possibilities for artists, especially those with established fanbases.

The coalition will campaign for a fairer deal on copyright, cited by Radiohead as one of their reasons for leaving EMI last year and releasing *In Rainbows* as an attention grabbing "pay what you can" download. Guitarist Ed O'Brien said: "For us, this is a no-brainer and we believe all artists and musicians should be signing up." The band's co-manager, Brian Message, said it would allow new artists to benefit from the experiences and clout of more established ones.

Message said up and coming artists no longer saw signing with a major record label as the only way forward. New artists tended to be much more savvy about business because they had built up a fanbase online, promoted their own gigs and released their own demos.

The Featured Artists' Coalition, the term given to "primary named performers" on recordings, will be headed by an independent chairman with six artists, three managers and representatives from the Musicians' Union and Equity.

It will have a six-point manifesto, including fair compensation after deals between labels and technology companies, and a "use it or lose it" approach to copyright so that recordings don't go unreleased. As the utopian dream of the digital age - removing barriers between artist and fan - gives way to a more complex reality, artists fear they are in danger of being cut out of the loop between record labels and technology giants. They are concerned about offerings such as MySpace Music, which has given big labels a share in its new ad-supported streaming service, and Nokia's Comes With Music, which will pay labels part of the subscription price in return for unlimited downloads.

Message said a memorandum of understanding between the government, internet service providers and labels ignored the rights of artists.

Jazz Summers, manager of The Verve, said that while there had always been industry bodies to represent record labels, managers, publishers and live promoters, there had never been a group to represent the artists.

"Every meeting I go to, I look around the table and there are 20 or 30 people, but no one representing the artist," he said. "This is not about bashing record labels. But it is about recognising that the interests of the record label and the artist are not always aligned."

How the union leaders match up

Thom Yorke, millionaire rockstar

Age: 39

Fanbase: Band sold 25m albums worldwide by 2007

Youth: Inspired by Brian May of Queen, got his first guitar at seven. Studied Fine Art

and English. Worked part time as a DJ and in a psychiatric hospital.

Career: Lead singer of Radiohead who were ranked 73 in Rolling Stone's greatest artists in history. Never learned to read music - "If someone lays the notes on a page in front of me its meaningless."

Interests: Supports a variety of issues including Free Tibet, Fair trade, anti-globalisation, Amnesty International, and Friends of the Earth. He refused to meet Tony Blair to discuss climate change.

Lives: In Oxford with his partner and two children.

Brendan Barber, TUC general secretary

Age: 57

Fanbase: 6.6m members of the TUC **Youth:** Spent his first 16 years living in the grounds of a borstal where his father taught bricklaying. Studied Social Sciences at City University, became president of the students' union.

Career: Joined the TUC in 1975, rose up the ranks to general secretary in 2003. Once accused Tony Blair of making unionists feel like "embarrassing elderly relatives", when they visited No 10.

Interests: Keen golfer and Everton supporter.

Lives: North London with his wife, with whom he has two children.

Robert Parker

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008